

4.30pm at Pink Stitch. Maryanne Petsinis is wearing earthy colours, a relaxed zebra print top and khaki harem pants. She doesn't look like she's at the office. She's on another safari through the cutthroat Australian fashion industry. The afternoon sunlight flows in through the window behind us. It illuminates the flowing white curtains in the centre of the tastefully understated, open space. The faux crocodile skin lounge she sits on is hard but deceptively comfortable, just like the fashion industry itself.



From a bland, office job to the cutting edge of postmodern Australian fashion

The spectacular rise of designer Maryanne Petsinis

What the industry provides, "It's either all, cheap, cheap, cheap or you have to pay \$300, there is no middle range," Maryanne said. That is why she is on this safari. She's found the missing link in the industry. Maryanne caters for "that yummy mummy, that young middle age group neglected in the market," to provide affordable yet sophisticated clothes for "a maximum of \$129.95".

Maryanne began finding the missing link in childhood. Her mother was a dressmaker allowing her to learn about patterning as she grew up. She knew from 16 that the fashion industry is where she belongs. "I worked as an office secretary. It was so boring. I'd spend all my lunchtimes in boutiques and weekends at Lincraft looking at patterns and fabrics," she said. By 22 she was working in boutiques and at 25 opened the Dji Vu franchise.

After 15 successful years in retail to-

gether at Deja Vu, Con Petsinis, Maryanne's manager, realised that it was time to change. "We wanted to create something from nothing. A piece of our personal identity in our own clothes that can't be found on the street," he said.

That is the essence of Pink Stitch, founded in 2008, and sister brand August Street. "You have to have an exclusive signature in each graphic," Maryanne said. "I try and incorporate elements of the Earth in my prints. It is out of the ordinary, yet wearable and special." She points to the rack of clothes imprinted with unusual, neutrally coloured symbols of fish eyes and ocean flora. Ironically, the line is called 'Fish Out of Water' appealing to someone needing to be freed from the strains of urban life.

"The search for freedom is best found

at a rough ocean on a cold, overcast day," Maryanne said. No wonder the Winter 2011 Pink Stitch photo shoot will feature the ocean jasper stone along Queensland's beaches to shape the mood of the new designs.

"The way each one of my designs is embedded in the Earth, in a different mood and time is what makes the clothes so great," Maryanne said. You experience a sense of distance from bland prints you find in large department stores like Myer. That is why Pink Stitch is popular among celebrities including Khloe Kardashian and Denise Richards.

"By thinking outside the box," Maryanne said, her demographic widened so dramatically. Pink Stitch has something for every woman up to the age of 55. It is telling "a unique, private story"

rather than forcing a generic image into the market. "When top designers design outfits for catwalks, none of it is wearable, but it's original. Fashion is a chance to show your personality."

Maryanne's vibrant personality shines through in her own work. A lover of European travel, she takes out photos from a trip to Barcelona. They highlight the grungy, underground, unconventional style of Blue Street. "The uniqueness of the Barcelona boutiques showed me a different aspect of fashion. When I saw something odd, I immediately sketched it."

Maryanne's philosophy works, take inspiration as it comes to you rather than forcing yourself to become inspired. "Every moment is a defining moment for me, every day's design is a new challenge."

The challenges faced in Pink Stitch's initial stages were somewhat more concrete. "The industry was more profitable 10 years ago. Now it's very competitive and cut-throat because of the Chinese market entering Australia," Con said. This led to a large communication barrier. "You're relying on your translator to deliver the message correctly to Chinese fabric sellers. There is a big element of trust involved."

Trusting herself was Maryanne's key to overcoming these barriers. "From day go, when we sold tops out of Con's boot I knew we would make it. I know how to hit the market."

She hasn't only hit the market. She had moulded it around Pink Stitch, as it's so unique. It's like Mother Nature guides her, the timeless Earth motif will be a sustaining life force selling her designs for decades.

"A RETURN TO ITHACA" The legendary home island of Odysseas (Ulysees) and of thousands of emigrant Greeks around the world

The Ithacan Community of Sydney is preserving its history and heritage with the creation of a digital oral history and image archive and the release of its inaugural publication Ithacan Voices, Ithacan Memories, a collection of interviews and photographs that record the journeys and reminiscences of Ithacans who made Sydney their home. From the tiny island of Ithaca to banana farms, country town cafis and beachside suburbs, this book showcases the richness of a shared Greek Australian heritage.

The project's co-ordinator and author of Ithacan Voices, Ithacan Memories, Ouranita Karadimas, emphasizes the century-long connection between Ithacans and Australians: 'Ithacans were one of the first regional groups from Greece to migrate and settle in here. For decades before they headed for Australia in the early twentieth century, Ithacan men and merchant sailors had spent years travelling and working, particularly in the US and South Africa, sending money home to support their families.'

'The words and images in the interviews and in the archive remind us that the story of a Greek Australian heritage goes beyond post World War II migration to Australia's capital cities. It is a story of both the city and the bush. It is rare to meet a Greek, particularly an Ithacan or Kytherian, who does not have family, relatives, connections with the farms, cafis, country towns and communities of rural and regional Australia.'

'My own personal history is very much a part of this shared heritage. My father was born in Ithaca and arrived in Australia in 1928, no passport, accompanied only by a family friend, at the age of ten. He never returned to Ithaca. His father had already been here five years, working in cafis owned by Greeks in Newcastle. My father brought his Ithacan bride, my mother Louisa, to Australia in 1957, and my brother, sister and I were born and raised in Albury on the New South Wales-Victorian border. Opposite our cafi, on

the outskirts of town, were some of the biggest livestock saleyards in southern New South Wales. Our customers were farmers and graziers, long-haul truckies, small business owners and people travelling between Sydney and Melbourne.'

The fifteen individuals who tell their stories in Ithacan Voices, Ithacan Memories include Anthoula Stefanatos, whose husband was allowed to remain in Australia after jumping ship as a young merchant seaman during the Great Depression. He avoided authorities by being protected by fellow Ithacans and working for Greeks in cafis in remote country towns.

Antonia Karavias and Louisa Delaporta tell a story familiar to many young Greek women who arrived in Australia in the postwar years, as brides-to-be in arranged marriages.

Stan Mavros, who came to Australia as a seventeen year old at the end of World War II, recounts terrifying moments during the German occupation of Ithaca while Anastasia Constantinou and Maria Spyraakis describe their experiences of the earthquakes of 1953. Martha Manias, whose family settled near Mulumlimby at the beginning of World War II, remembers growing up in Ithaca and on a banana farm on the New South Wales north coast.

The name Ithaca is most often associated with Homer's epic poem The Odyssey and its hero Odysseus. Today Ithaca is a yachting and holiday destination with its harbour, mountain walks, beaches, archeological sites and heritage villages unspoiled by tourism.

For much of the nineteenth and twentieth century, Ithaca was an island of emigration. A hundred years ago Ithaca had a population of close to ten thousand. These days, Ithaca's population of three thousand includes many adults in their middle years, pensioners and a small but growing number of returnees – people who left as children or young adults who have come back to enjoy their retirement or who regularly return

to spend summer in their paternal homes. Today, several thousand individuals of Ithacan descent live in Australia, New Zealand, the USA, Canada and South Africa.

Ithacans have a long history of migration to Australia with early settlers arriving in the mid-nineteenth century. The Ithacan Association of Sydney, one of the oldest Greek community organisations in Australia, was established in the 1930s. In Sydney, as in other cities, Ithacans pride themselves on the cultural heritage they share with both Greeks and Australians, and on the fact that the Ithacan Association of Sydney, though small in membership, is in existence after more than seventy years, despite the fact that most Ithacan families are now in their fourth or fifth generation and no longer have family or material connection with their ancestral island. What does endure, however, is a strong emotional, cultural and spiritual connection and that is precisely what the book and the project aim to capture.

Cleo Trilivas, President of the Ithacan Association and a third generation Greek Australian, captures the sense of nostalgia and the desire for a connection with Ithaca in the book's final chapter: 'As silly as the cliché goes, something draws you there. Whether it's the blood, whether it's the air, whether it's the sea. As Ulysses did, you do go back home. Not to a house, but to home. There are the roots there. I've travelled the world extensively, been to lots of different places, but Ithaca is still home. I can't define it. It's hugely abstract, but it's in the psyche, as we say.'

The launch of Ithacan Voices, Ithacan Memories will take place on Sunday 5 December 2010 at the St George Greek Orthodox Church Hall, 90 Newcastle st, Rose Bay, 1.00pm. The launch will be made by Associate Professor Vrasidas Karalis, Department of Modern Greek, University of Sydney. Entry is free and everyone is invited to this event that marks the presence of Ithacans in Sydney and the Antipodes.